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ABSTRACT

Duty related separation for military family members demands family support programs to help alleviate the stresses produced by separation. Not only is performance of the military member affected, but so is the emotional stability of the spouse and children. Three phases of emotion and behavior can be delineated in the sequence-reaction to the loss or change of separation: (1) protest; (2) despair; and (3) detachment. This sequence can lead to generalized anxiety and significant depressive symptoms. Adequate preparation for the stages of separation (the notification of separation, the actual departure, and the resulting difficulty of coping alone) will help the spouse adjust to the new roles and life style. The waiting spouse must also adapt to the new emotions and behaviors of reunion when the military spouse returns. This final stage of separation adjustment, integration and reorganization, is made difficult by individual growth and change in the waiting spouse and other family members. Crisis intervention, prior preparation, and sustained support enable the waiting spouse to cope more effectively with all stages of separation. Family counseling, financial and legal counseling, education, support groups, individual counseling, and crisis hot lines can all contribute to the family's successful adjustment to the military members' separation and return. (ABB)

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CRISIS INTERVENTION TOPICS

PREPARATION FOR SEPARATION: PREPARING THE MILITARY FAMILY FOR DUTY-RELATED SEPARATION

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PREPARATION FOR SEPARATION: PREPARING THE MILITARY FAMILY FOR DUTY-RELATED SEPARATION

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the all-volunteer forces, the military has more married personnel in its ranks than ever before in history. Approximately ninety-three percent (93%) of the officers and eighty percent (80%) of the enlisted and noncommissioned officers are married. Of these married personnel, eighty-eight percent (88%) of the officers and eighty (80%) of the enlisted and noncommissioned officers have one or more children (Montalvo, 1968).

The military family then has become a focal point. Previously, the services had concentrated their concern on drug and alcohol abuse issues; however, due to the increasing number of spouses and children, the military has shifted its focus to family issues, for example, single-parents, pregnancy among service personnel, "dependent" husbands, joint reassignment of dual-service career pairs, twenty-four hour day care to aid single-parents and working mothers, and " . . . an increased demand for family support programs to alleviate the stresses of family separation" (Hunter & Nice, 1978a:vii).

These duty-related separations in the military may be regular or sporadic, lengthy or brief, and may be precipitated for a variety of reasons. The service member may be required to serve an overseas unaccompanied tour of duty of one to two years duration or may have various temporary duty assignments which may vary in length from a few days to several months. Furthermore, the military member is often required to participate in field training throughout the year, and during these times is again separated from the family. Thus, separation is a fact of life for service personnel. No matter what the

reason, " . . . family separations owing to wartime assignments, unaccompanied tours, or repeated temporary duty assignments have a profound impact upon the family system and the emotional health of its individual members" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:298).

The military family then is in need of supportive services during such separations. Equally crucial is some form of prior preparation for the family members to inform them of potential problem areas. This advance preparation is particularly important for young service members' families who are soon to encounter separation as research has indicated that " . . . it is the first separation which has the greatest effect on the family" (Hunter & Nice, 1978b:183).

In the past, separation has been studied extensively in relationship to children and separation anxiety. More recently, however, military authorities have begun to recognize the importance of maintaining military effectiveness by providing some care and support for family members, especially when the family is in a state of separation. Various research efforts have documented the impact of family separation. A Chicago study in 1977 (Ilfeld, 1979) noted that women separated from their spouses, low income population individuals, and unmarried women are three examples of population groups which would benefit from some method of therapeutic intervention to decrease the possibility of anxiety reactions. Such results can be extended to include duty-related separation in the military.

Further, in 1949, Holmes and Masuda began systematically studying patients according to their response regarding wellness and illness after life events. Various types of life events were considered. In the original

research study on stress and life change, the questionnaire given to respondents was constructed with events listed in two categories: "(1) those indicative of the life style of the individual, and (2) those indicative of occurences that involved the individual" (Scott & Senay, 1973:162). Among the life events on the questionnaire, marital separation was listed in 22nd place; marital reconciliation with mate was listed 24th. Yet when the responses were tabulated and analyzed for the research report, marital separation ranked as the third most impacting event in the life of the individual preceded only by death of a spouse or divorce. Marital reconciliation was ranked ninth in the results.

In addition, a major theme uncovered in this research study was the fact that no matter whether the stressful life event was experienced as a pleasant or desirable occurrence, or as undesirable, the "occurrence evoked, or was associated with, some adaptive or coping behavior on the part of the involved individual" (Scott & Senay, 1973:164).

During a duty-related separation, the military spouse may experience several methods of coping on a continuum from adaptive to maladaptive. For example, a young, inexperienced wife, or one who has undergone a number of recent stressors is at high risk for developing psychological or functional problems. Another high risk spouse is one who has developed an unstable lifestyle orientation and behavioral pattern. On the other hand, a spouse who has more refined or mature coping mechanisms has the advantage in meeting adversity. Such individuals may be able to integrate their life experience, knowledge, and emotional resources to reorganize their life after separation and maintain an effective lifestyle in which growth is possible.

Such growth, however, may create future problems when the couple is reunited. The possibility of divorce when the husband returns is another risk inherent in duty-related separations. This is often directly related to the wife's perception of marital stability before the separation (Weiss, 1975).

Yet regardless of the coping behavior demonstrated by the separated spouse, a crisis situation exists. The situational and social factors involved with separation are numerous and are compounded by the emotional and coping components. The major emotional impact is loss, and whenever there is a loss in the quality of life as a person has known it to be, this constitutes a crisis.

THE SEQUENCE OF REACTIONS TO DUTY-RELATED SEPARATION

Three phases in the sequence-reaction to loss or change can be delineated. All involve emotions and behavior leading to a reorganization of psychological equilibrium and functioning ability when processed in an appropriate manner. The phases are protest, despair, and detachment. Emotions and behaviors associated with each phase include:

1. Protest:
   a. Emotions: psychological pain, anger, anxiety, confusion
   b. Behavior: denial, crying, hostility, somatic symptoms
2. Despair:
   a. Emotions: grief, anguish, depression
   b. Behavior: increased somatic symptoms, restlessness, disorganization, accident proneness, and searching. (Searching behavior of a separated wife could be exemplified by her driving 90 or 100 miles once or twice a month to visit the commissary and exchange facilities if she is not close to a military establishment. This behavior epitomizes the need to belong to a familiar group.)

3. Detachment:

   a. Emotions: apathy, emotional and physical isolation, resignation

   b. Behavior: boredom, withdrawal, automatic behavior. (Boredom is a product of a lack of challenge which can lead to loneliness when there is a love object lost. Withdrawal is the most frequent behavior in separated or widowed women. Men, however, usually turn to another woman for companionship and someone to talk to and tell about their grief. Finally, automatic behavior could result in child abuse as a result of the emotions and behaviors depicted in the protest and despair phases.)

Detachment is the most taxing and tiring part of grief associated with loss and change. It means breaking away from the meaningful relationship and traditions. This is a high risk phase for illness, withdrawal from meaningful social events, escape mechanisms such as alcohol or drug abuse and promiscuity, suicide, and the cumulative inability to work through the repercussions of loss and change. Reorganization is compatible with and occurs upon completion of the processing experience when a person is able to go on with living under the new set of circumstances.

Aside from the generalized anxiety associated with separation, there is a greater possibility for significant depressive symptoms both in the spouse and the separated children. This depression can have detrimental effects later in life, especially for the children, if the losses leading to depression are not met with constructive intervention and purposeful meaning organized into the individual's life (Scott & Senay, 1973).

Obviously, from the above descriptors, it is to the advantage of the separated spouse for the military community to afford some method of prevention for the consequences of an unwanted separation due to military duty. Separation becomes less traumatic if adequate preparation precedes departure and also if the various reactions can be more fully understood.

Separation, after all, is a loss as is death; however, separation is only a temporary bereavement.

STAGES OF SEPARATION

The first stage of separation is initiated by the notification of the impending departure of the service member. At this point, the spouse may experience the protest phase cited earlier, characterized by anger, anxiety, and confusion. The spouse may feel anger toward the military member for this desertion of sorts, or anger may be directed toward the military establishment which has ordered this loss. Anxiety could spring from fears of being required to cope alone or from concern over actual physical security, as in protecting the home against intrusion. Confusion would result through having to deal with emotions which are new and unique to this relationship, and the situation may be compounded by a required move to off-post housing or to a new location. Depending on the time factor following notification, despair and perhaps even detachment could result. The longer the period from initial notification to actual departure, the greater the likelihood of processing the emotions toward detachment.

The physical departure of the military member marks a second stage of separation which may be characterized by some protest or denial, but more likely will elicit emotions and behavior of despair. Grief, anguish, and depression highlight this period. Spouse and family feel alone, and gloom descends upon the household. In a world of married couples, the waiting spouse may feel ill at ease; she is married yet is "single" through circumstances beyond her control. Somatic symptoms could be listlessness, headaches, body weight fluctuations, and loss of apetite. In addition, separation often

stimulates an increase in tobacco and alcohol consumption. Feelings that life is meaningless and even some suicidal fantasies have been reported during this phase (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976).

Following the departure stage of separation, the waiting spouse must begin to deal with the intermittent crises of daily living. Increased demands on the family accentuate this period. In the case of wife and mother who is left alone, her traditional responsibilities are heightened due to separation; she must now function in the dual capacity of mother and father. This often stressful role creates certain difficulties and may have long-term results. With father absence comes the increased probability of maternal overprotection; the "single" mother may also become more concerned with obedience of the children (Hillenbrand, 1970). Additional disturbing family problems for which the spouse is sometimes totally unprepared include negotiating legal difficulties, disciplining the children, handling family finances, maintaining the health of the family, and maintaining the car and house.

Yet, the service member's absence may provide an opportunity for the waiting spouse to become involved in a host of activities, thereby enhancing self-esteen and occupying extra time both physically and emotionally (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976). Separation often serves as an impetus to growth for the waiting spouse.

Although separation may encourage individual growth, there is also an increased possibility for guilt feelings on the part of the waiting spouse. These are brought on by the dramatic shift in roles. Separation works against the traditional identity of the wife calling her to " . . . assert herself, gain control of the family and establish herself as the rightful legal representative of the family" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:119).

In addition to the spouse's efforts to cope, the entire family also develops certain adjustment techniques. "For most families, adjustment to separation involved the process of 'closing ranks' (closing out of the husband's role) in order for the family to develop a more efficient and functional pattern of operation" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:304). Yet this same action which is so needed for survival of the family unit is also the source of guilt feelings for the waiting spouse. This is indeed a difficult transition for any wife, and assertive action on her part often sparks conflict upon the reunion of the couple. "In contrast, totally dependent wives unaccustomed to the responsibilities brought about by the separation would be confronted with a crisis and would perhaps respond to the situation by withdrawing, thereby neglecting a host of family responsibilities" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:139).

Another stress during separation may involve an adjustment to living in a civilian community. When military personnel are required to serve an unaccompanied tour of duty, the family must vacate post housing. Such a move may become a potential source of strain by increasing feelings of alienation resulting in further withdrawal. Problems arise because the military community has previously provided many resources which are now lost (Montalvo, 1968). "The close-knit network of relationships within the Army provides significant protection against the stress of separation. The career army family's separation from the military community was seen as at least as disruptive as the absence of the sponsor from the home" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:173). In a civilian community, the waiting spouse may perceive the neighbors as nonaccepting, serving to isolate the spouse and further increase the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

In the emotions and behaviors of the detachment phase usually occurring during the separation of the service member there are all the integral parts of the crisis stage. The waiting partner may withdraw emotionally or seek escape outlets such as alcohol. On the other hand, separation need not evoke a crisis in every case. There are successful adjustments to all the emotions produced through separation. "Frequent prior military tours by the husband, resulting in absence, may provide some wives with the experience needed to cope with the situation. Thus, adjustment may be eased by a sort of rehearsal or graduated immunization. Family life would continue, for the family who experienced frequent separations, with only a minimal break in the usual routine" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:139).

However, successful adaptation to separation from the military member is not the final goal. Once the spouse has experienced the protest, despair, and detachment initiated by the notification of separation, the actual departure, and the resulting difficulty of coping alone, the process begins anew with the anticipated return of the spouse.

While awaiting the return of the military member, a barrage of new emotions and behaviors such as excitement, apprehension, and accident proneness may possibly engulf the waiting spouse. During the absence of the service member, necessary changes have taken place which facilitated family survival and maintenance; however, reunion may mean termination of some of the new responsibilities. Therefore, this period is often a critical phase of readjustment. The waiting spouse may eagerly anticipate the return, yet may also fear this reunion. A primary concern at this point for many wives is the husband's reaction to the changing role of the wife and her increased independence. "A realistic appraisal of the wives' concerns

and apprehensions about the husband's return suggested the anticipation of reunion posed a threat to one or more rewards that separation had provided, e.g. opportunity to assume greater freedom, an independent income with the latitude to determine its use, and the avoidance of any confrontation with their husbands about the manner in which the wives conducted themselves during the husband's absence" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:139).

Upon the return of the military member, another stage of separation is entered. In this phase the entire family must adjust to its changed status. "The process of reunion involves the reestablishment of bonds of coherence and family unity, of which the husband-wife relationship, the division of labor within the home, the revitalization of the father-child relationship, and the stabilization of the husband-wife, mother-child, and father-child relationships are paramount" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:303).

Many assume that if family balance was disturbed and problems were created through separation, reunion will rectify the situation. Research shows, however, that return of the service member serves only to upset the balance which was established during the absence.

Thus, the resulting difficulties stimulated by reunion lead the family into the final stage of separation adjustment which is integration and reorganization. In this phase, " . . . the social and psychological stresses of prolonged separation encouraged the family to develop behaviors and styles of life which lessened the possibility of successful reunions" (Hunter & Nice, 1978b:173). Integration and reorganization of the family is made difficult by the growth of the waiting spouse and of the other family members. Also creating problems for family reorganization is the tendency of the absent spouse to " . . . idealize persons, places, and past events, and they returned to their families with a distorted view of how things really had been when they

left" (McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1976:303). An extensive effort on the part of all family members and the returning military member is required in order to work through this final stage of reintegration of the family system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIOR PREPARATION AND CRISIS INTERVENTION

The entire process of separation, from notification through reorganization of the family following the reunion, is replete with sources of potential strain, " . . . and each separation is a psychological crisis that may hinder a couple from learning to interact maturely" (Hunter & Nice, 1978b:173). Therefore, crisis intervention, prior preparation, and sustained support are all viable alternatives enabling the waiting spouse to cope more effectively during separation.

Since the end of the Vietnam era, the popularity of the idea of support for waiting families has waned, yet thousands of families each year still undergo the strains of military induced separation. Not until the separation has begun do most families realize all the ramifications of the situation, but with prior preparation, the crises should be somewhat mitigated.

First, the families should be counseled before the separation. If the family is prepared in advance, the emotions which are later experienced are more understandable to them, and are therefore, easier to endure. Second, beyond the emotional component, simple financial and legal concerns need to be discussed. Often service members go on temporary duty or overseas assignment and leave a spouse who is not adequately prepared to take over the family finances. The waiting partner may not have any idea of the total family assets and liabilities. There may be no wills, or at least no up-to-date wills, for either husband or wife. Concerns such as car insurance, car title,

and life insurance may be totally unknown to the spouse. Thus, preparation for the impending separation is a process of counseling and educating the military family. Sustained support throughout the separation is also crucial. Most military installations have the facilities and personnel to provide waiting spouses with support groups, individual counseling, and crisis hot lines. Finally, the couple need to be prepared to cope with the impact of the return of the service member.

With appropriate preparation preceding separation and sustained assistance during the lonely months until the service member returns, the waiting spouse will hopefully not only endure the separation more efficiently and effectively, but also will have an opportunity to grow. As Hunter and Nice (1978b:174) note, "adjustment to separation may be viewed as a developmental task with problems occurring before, during, or after the actual separation." Therefore, counseling and support need to be provided throughout this process to include the phase following the military member's return, in order to work through the crisis of family integration and reorganization.

Duty-related separations are a reality for the military family, and whether the family copes depends on their ability to adapt and change. All life change is an opportunity for growth. With appropriate help throughout the period of separation, the waiting spouse and family are encouraged to move toward an adaptive coping style which will mitigate the intermittent crises of separation and help to reestablish the family unit upon return of the service member.

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